UNIT 3 CONVERSATIONAL ANALYSIS

Structure

3.0   OBJECTIVES

The objective of this unit is to understand that even conversations are structured. This unit discusses some of the important ways of analysing conversations.

3.1   INTRODUCTION

In the previous units we discussed code-mixing and language planning. In this unit we look at another aspect of language in use – conversational analysis. Many discourse analysts have voiced the need to go beyond the analysis of sounds, words and sentences, and incorporate analyses of how conversation works : "that is, how talk between people is organised; what makes it coherent and understandable; how people introduce and change topics; how they interrupt, ask questions, and give or evade answers; and, in general, how the conversational flow is maintained or disrupted" (Stubbs, 1983 : 7).

There are a number of approaches to conversational analysis. A few of these are discussed in this unit.

3.2   THE STRUCTURE OF CONVERSATIONS

Language is organised systematically not only at the levels of sounds, words and sentences, but also at the level of conversations. Conversations are structured in the sense that they have a beginning, a middle and an end. They are also structured in the sense that not anything can follow anything in a conversation. There are syntagmatic constraints on the possible sequences of utterances. The following examples would make the point clear :

Example 1: A telephone conversation :

Caller : Is that two nine one six four three six?
Callee : Which number have you dialled?

smooth exchange of speaking turns in conversations, thus avoiding an excessive amount of simultaneous talking.

How exactly does this turn-taking take place? Have you ever heard anyone say : "My turn is over. You may speak now!"? How does one get a turn to speak and how does she/he pass it on? According to Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974), turn-taking is governed by three principles:

1) The current speaker 'selects' the next speaker, as for example by asking a question to someone in particular.

2) In case the current speaker does not select the next speaker, then the hearers may, but need not self-select themselves for the next speakership. The first to talk becomes the speaker.

3) If the current speaker does not select the next speaker and if no other person self-selects, then the current speaker may, but need not, continue.

A hearer may self-select himself/herself for the next turn either when the current speaker gives a signal that she/he is ending his/her turn (also known as the **turn-yielding signal**) or by interrupting. How does one 'signal' the end of his/her turn? One way is obviously by asking a question. There are other ways also which we unconsciously use all the time to signal the end of our turn. For example, we lower our pitch and/or volume, we terminate any hand gesticulation that we had been using while talking, we laugh on the completion of an utterance, we repeat in a low tone and a low pitch what we had just said.

It is not that we take a turn only when the current speaker gives a turn-yielding signal. We can, and do at times, 'snatch' a turn by interrupting. People employ different strategies for interrupting. Two of these are : starting on a higher pitch level than the current speaker, and using certain negative words like 'but' or 'no' although they have nothing contradictory to say (this is also known as '**butting-in**').

Just as conversational openings show cultural differences, even turn-taking strategies show cultural differences. What is acceptable in one society may be considered rude or over-polite to the other.

Investigations of face-to-face conversations have suggested that visually-mediated cues play an important role in the regulation of speaker turns. Does that mean that the turn-taking mechanism will get disrupted in the absence of a visual medium? A moment's reflection shows that this is not so because if it had been so, then smooth transition of turns on the telephone would not have been possible.

3.2.3   The Closing of a Conversation

All the conversations that are begun have to be ended, and so the last part of every conversation is the closing of the conversation. This part has also been referred to as the 'closing section' (Schegloff and Sacks 1973) because it starts with the initiation of the closing and ends with the termination of the talk exchange. And, as we shall see shortly, a lot can occur in between.

For closing a conversation, the participants must first agree that they have nothing more to say. This agreement is achieved by the initiation of the closing by one participant and its acknowledgement by the other. Following is an example of a **pre-closing sequence** :

Example: 4

A : We-ell, it's been really nice talking to you !
B : Same here !

Example 2 : Conversational exchange between a customer and a salesman at a readymade garments shop :

Customer : Do you have a plain white shirt in my size?

Shopkeeper : Welcome sir, can I help you?

What makes these exchanges amusing is that the two utterances are occurring in the wrong structural positions. The very fact that we find the above exchanges funny proves that some conversational sequences are acceptable whereas others are not.

Broadly speaking, any conversation can be divided into three main parts : **the opening, the middle** and **the closing**. We'll briefly discuss each one of these.

3.2.1 Conversational Openings

There are many ways of opening a conversation or other talk-exchange. We can start the conversation without any preliminaries : "When will it stop raining ?" or we can open a conversation with the help of a **vocative** or attention-getter like "Excuse me,", "Hey", "Hey, Rita,". We can also open a conversation with the help of a **greeting** like "Hello!", "How nice to see you!", "What a pleasant surprise!", "Long time no see!", etc.

Though the act of opening a conversation is universal to all speech communities, there is a possibility that the way the conversations are opened may vary from one speech community to the other. Godard(1977) did a contrastive analysis of the phone call beginnings in the United States and in France. She found that the conversational openings are much more direct in the United States where the caller is not required to check the number, excuse and identify himself, or engage in polite conversation with whoever answers. In France, on the other hand, all these things are a must.

3.2.2 The Main Body of Conversation

After the opening of the conversation comes the main body of conversation which can vary in length. In some cases it may not exist at all. This will happen when the opening is directly followed by a closing. Following is an example of such a talk exchange:

Example 3 : Two friends (A and B) meet each other in the college corridor. Both are in a hurry to reach their respective classrooms and both are aware of this. The exchange goes on as follows :

A : Hello !
B : Hi !
A : Bye !
B : Bye !

In this case we have an opening directly followed by a closing. However, most of the time this is not the case. In between the opening and the closing lies the main body of the conversation. It is here that we find topics being raised and changed, interruptions made, questions asked, answered or evaded.

An overall smooth running of any activity involving more than one person requires coordination. This coordination can be achieved with the help of **turn-taking**. Turn-taking is used for regulating traffic at intersections, for dealing with customers in shops, for ordering of moves in games, etc. It is also used for the

smooth exchange of speaking turns in conversations, thus avoiding an excessive amount of simultaneous talking.

How exactly does this turn-taking take place? Have you ever heard anyone say : "My turn is over. You may speak now!"? How does one get a turn to speak and how does she/he pass it on? According to Sacks, Schegloff and Jefferson (1974), turn-taking is governed by three principles:

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A : We-ell, it's been really nice talking to you !
B : Same here !

This pre-closing initiation and acknowledgement is followed by the 'leave-taking section', where the speakers may reinvoke materials just talked about, make arrangements for future contact, wish each other well, etc. The 'leave-taking section' ends with a **terminal exchange**, which consists of two adjacently positioned utterances, each produced by a different person. The following is a typical example of a terminal exchange :

Example : 5

A : Bye !
B : See you !

In most of the cases the terminal exchange ends the conversation. But, there is always a possibility of re-opening the conversation just after the terminal exchange and before the **contact-termination,** like - "oh, by the way, I forgot to tell you ...", or a desperate remark over the telephone, trying to stop the other person from disconnecting - "wait, wait a minute, I want to ask you something..." etc.

3.3 THE COOPERATIVE PRINCIPLE

A conversation requires a coordinated effort of two or more individuals. Mere talk to produce sentences does not constitute conversation.

Grice (1975 : 45) writes : "Our talk exchanges do not normally consist of a succession of disconnected remarks, and would not be rational if they did. They are characteristically, to some degree at least, of cooperative efforts, and each participant recognises in them, to some extent, a common purpose or set of purposes, or at least a mutually accepted direction."

According to Grice, all the speakers are expected to make their conversational contribution such as is required by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which one is engaged. He has termed this as the **Cooperative Principle** and proposed four 'maxims' or rules of conversation. Acting in accordance with these maxims will, according to Grice, yield results consistent with the Cooperative Principle. These maxims are:

1. **Maxim of Quantity**

Give the right amount of information when you talk:

1.   Make your contribution as informative as is required by the current purposes of the conversation.

2.   Do not make your contribution more informative than is required.

For example, if someone asks you casually as to where you stay, a cooperative answer would be something like "Karol Bagh" or "Defence Colony". A reply such as "on the earth" would not be informative enough, and something like "house number 760, street no. 5, Joshi road, Karol Bagh" would be over-informative.

2. **Maxim of Quality**

Try to make your contribution one that is true :

1.   Do not say what you believe to be false.

2.   Do not say that for which you lack adequate evidence.

For example, if someone asks you your name and your name is Pooja, then reply truthfully and don't say something like : "Akanksha" or "Medha".

3.   Maxim of Relevance

Be relevant.

For example, if someone asks you: "Is that your son ?", give a reply such as "yes", "no" ,"I wish he was!" or "Thank god he isn't!", and not something like " I love mangoes" or "I'm going to China next week".

4.   Maxim of Manner

Be perspicuous :

1.   Avoid obscurity of expression

2.   Avoid ambiguity

3.   Be brief (avoid unnecessary prolixity)

4.   Be orderly

For example, describe things in the order in which they occurred : "We went to Sukriti's place , had lunch with her and then went to Anupam PVR for the 3 to 6 show" rather than "We went to Anupam PVR for the 3 to 6 show and then went to Sukriti's place and had lunch with her"

3.4   CONVERSATIONAL IMPLICATURES

It would appear to most people that the Cooperative Principle is sheer common sense. It becomes interesting when we consider examples where people apparently do not follow this principle. In answer to the question : " How's life ?" one can receive a reply such as : "My maid is not well" which does not answer the question. In answer to the question : "Where have you been ?" one could get the response : "I've been to heaven !", which is certainly not true.

At the surface of it it appears that such replies are violating the cooperative principle. But, a minute's reflection will make it clear that such replies actually show how strongly this principle works : people are so certain that the other person is following the cooperative principle that even an apparent violation is also seen as important and informative. For example, if someone asks "How's life ?" and the reply is "My maid is not well" which seems to violate the maxim of relevance, the hearer is likely to assume that the information about the maid is somehow relevant and important. In trying to find out how this seemingly irrelevant information could be relevant, the listener will fill in the gaps with assumptions such as "since the maid does all the cleaning, washing and cooking for her, and she is not well, so the speaker must be having a tough time doing all the work herself."

Similarly, if someone tells an apparent lie such as "I've been to heaven!", the listener would not think "what a lie !". (S)he, on the other hand, would try to make out why the speaker had said such a thing. That is, the listeners always assume

that the speaker is adhering to the cooperative principle, and even apparent violations are treated as adherence and interpretations or implications are drawn accordingly. These implications are called **conversational implicatures.**

3.5   SPEECH ACTS

Speech acts are acts performed in uttering expressions. A number of utterances behave somewhat like actions. For example, the words "Give way!" convey the same notion as pushing someone out of the way. In fact, one could argue that all utterances are acts of some type. Even an utterance such as 'I am tired' can be regarded as a special type of act of making a statement : (I state that) I am tired.

This approach towards language is known as the **Speech Act Theory,** and it is just another method of classifying the ways in which humans use language. For example, the various possible speech acts which a speaker might attempt to perform would include statements, questions, commands, requests, promises, threats, suggestions, persuations,and so on. The most important or frequently encountered of these speech acts are the following :

statement: I'm going.
question :   Did you meet her ?
command :   Get lost !

These are examples of **Direct Speech Acts**, where the act is expressed directly by obvious linguistic means. **Indirect Speech Acts** on the other hand have the syntactic structure of another type of act. For example, if I'm feeling cold and I want to tell the other person present in the room to shut the window, I could utter any of the following :

Shut the window!
Could you shut the window (please)?
Aren't you feeling cold?
It's really cold in here.
If that window remains open, I'm going to freeze.

Although all the above utterances are intended to be commands or requests, not all of them have the typical command or request structure. Some of them have the overt structure of a question whereas there are others that look like statements. These are examples of indirect speech acts. Funny situations would arise if the hearer takes these indirect speech acts literally. For example, if on your saying Could you shut the window ?" which has the structure of a question , the hearer "Aren't you feeling cold ?" he replies "You bet I am !". These humourous situations arise because the hearer is taking your indirect speech act as direct.

3.6   LET US SUM UP

In this unit we have seen that conversations have also got a structure. They have an opening, a middle and an end. There are certain acceptable ways of opening and closing conversations and for taking turns while talking, and these ways could vary from culture to culture.

We have also seen that a conversation is a cooperative effort of two or more individuals. Even when a speaker appears to be non-cooperative, the hearer still

assumes that s/he is cooperative and tries to draw interpretations or implicatures to make sense of what has been said.

We have also looked at another way of analysing utterances as acts of different types!

3.7 KEY WORDS

closing section	it starts with the initiation of closing and ends with the termination of conversation.
conversational implicature	listeners interpret what people say conforming to the cooperative principle, even when this principle is overtly broken. They draw implications from such utterances which are not strictly there in the linguistic meaning. These are called conversational implicatures.
cooperative principle	the speakers of a conversation are expected to make their conversational contribution such as is required by the accepted purpose or direction of the talk exchange in which they are engaged. This is called the cooperative principle.
speech act theory	a theory that tries to analyse in terms of the intentions of the speaker while speaking and the effects s/he achieves on his/her listeners.

terminal exchange	it consists of two adjacently positioned utterances, each produced by a different person. It is used to end the conversation. For example,
	    speaker A : Bye.
	    speaker B : Bye.

turn-yielding signal	any signal given by the speaker to indicate that s/he is ending his/her turn.
vocative	this term refers to the word, which is usually a noun or a pronoun, that is used for addressing.

3.8 READING LIST

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3.9   EXERCISES

1.   Do you agree that conversations are structured? Give reasons for your answer.

2.   Discuss the different ways in which a conversation can be opened.

3.   What is meant by the term 'turn-taking' in conversation? What are the three principles of turn-taking?

4.   What is meant by 'butting-in'? What are the other interruptive strategies employed by people?

5.   Discuss the various steps involved in closing a conversation.

6.   What is meant by the Cooperative Principle? Discuss the four maxims that form the Cooperative Principle.

7.   Which maxim is one trying to safeguard when one says :

   (i)   Well, to cut it short,...
   (ii)   I think ....
   (iii)   I won't bore you with all the details...
   (iv)   As far as I know,...

8.   Explain, with suitable examples, what the term conversational implicature means.

9.   If, in reply to your question - "Are you coming for the picnic tomorrow ?", you get a reply - "My mother is not well.", what implicature will you draw?

10.   What is the difference between conversationally implicating something and saying it? Give an example to make the difference clear.

11.   How would you analyze the following exchange in terms of the actions performed by the speakers :

father : Isn't it past your bedtime ?

son : I've reached the climax of the story !